

# **American Profiles: June 2011**

## **George Papagiannis**

### **Officer in Charge of the UNESCO Office in Baghdad**

My name is George Papagiannis, and I'm from New York City. I was born and raised in New York, and I went to school up in Boston, at Boston University, where I graduated with a degree in broadcast journalism. I got my start in the news business. And I ended up working in Boston but then moved on to Washington D.C., then overseas, and ended up doing some international media development work and now I'm working for UNESCO. I started with UNESCO in the fall of 2007, and my initial assignment was to come and work in the division of Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace at the headquarters in Paris.

I spent my first two years here in Paris, but toward the end of my second year, we were encountering some challenges in our Iraq office in that there wasn't really an opportunity to have a steady representative based in Baghdad. And I had already done work in Baghdad when I was working for Internews, the media development NGO. I had been in Baghdad in 2003, working on a USAID-funded project, in fact, that helped develop the media law and regulatory framework for a post-Saddam Iraq. So my boss said, 'well, maybe you could help us out in what we're trying to accomplish in Iraq, where we really don't have a steady presence'. And I just jumped at the opportunity—it was too good not to.

In spite of the difficulties, in spite of the dangers and challenges, to me it had great appeal. I believe that there is wonderful opportunity in the midst of chaos. Not to suggest that today's Iraq is chaotic, but there are very many challenges that we need to overcome in order to help the Iraqi people achieve the vision that they want for their country. And I believe that what they want are functioning democratic institutions that give them a say in how their government is run, that give them the opportunity to develop their families, their own personal wealth, and to live in peace, which I think is, of course, one of the most important things.

When I was assigned to this, what I was asked to do was not only manage our media development portfolio, but also to represent UNESCO in Iraq—to represent the Iraq office, which is based in Amman, in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq in *all* of its mandates, so covering science, culture, education, and media development, which I directly manage.

The Iraq office has nearly \$50 million in projects that it's undertaking in all of UNESCO's mandates- in science, in education, in culture, and in media development. Because the security

situation, although improving, remains unstable, it's very difficult first and foremost for the Iraqis but also for the international community that is working with Iraqis to help them achieve the vision that they have for their country. And so when we operate, because of the security situation, we are at times frustrated by our inability to connect more regularly with our Iraqi counterparts. But, in spite of that, we're doing incredible work.

In the area of education, we're working on pedagogy, curriculum development, teacher training, and institutional capacity building. In science, we have a project that is dealing with the water resources in Iraq, which is critical for the country in terms of managing those resources. In culture, we work in historical preservation. Everybody knows of Iraq perhaps from their history lessons as kids. Mesopotamia is where Iraq is, and it is *rich* in cultural heritage that is important not only to Iraqis—it's *world* heritage that is important to our understanding of who we are, no matter whether we are Iraqi, American, or a European from Greece or Germany. This is all important work that we're doing. And, of course, in the area of media development the work that we do is essential because we're attempting to help Iraqis give themselves, through a professional media industry, an independent media sector—information that they need in real time to make decisions about what they do every day and what they might want to do in the future. And these are all critical.

I think that what UNESCO represents are the highest values that Americans embrace. UNESCO is an organization that is committed to peace, to justice, and to creating economic opportunity for people by creating knowledge societies—by providing people access to information, by improving the quality of education, by ensuring that natural resources are managed appropriately. These are key elements that I think all Americans embrace. And also the diversity, our values and the principles that have helped to develop our America are, I believe, universal values. Universal values of respect for human rights, universal values for having equal opportunity because you have access to information and can create better opportunity for your children by getting them well-educated so that they can go forward. I think every American and every Iraqi wants a better world for their children, their grandchildren, and so on. I think these are shared values, and I think UNESCO is the kind of organization within the UN family that specifically has a unique mandate that allows it to move forward on these key and critical issues—these key and critical *development* issues.